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Author(s): Robert M. Grant

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EARLY CHRISTIAN GEOGRAPHY

BY

ROBERT M. GRANT

1. *Samaria-Galilee-Judaea*

Greek critics beginning with Herodotus claimed that Paris took Helen to Sidon in the *Iliad* but from Sparta directly to Ilium in the *Cypria*—which therefore were not written by Homer.¹ Similarly, Hans Conzelmann criticized Luke for inventing a special geography of the “holy land,” which he found in Luke 17:11, “As he was going to Jerusalem he passed through Samaria and Galilee.” From this Conzelmann inferred that for Luke “Judaea and Galilee are immediately adjacent, and ... Samaria lies alongside them, apparently bordering on both the regions.”² He supported his conjecture from Acts 9:31 (“the church in all Judaea and Galilee and Samaria”),³ from the geography of Strabo (who names areas in Judaea, apparently to the north of Joppa, as “Galilee and Jericho and Philadelphia and Samaria”),⁴ and from an ambiguous expression in Pliny. Strabo, however, does not seem to be following a map when he begins with Galilee and Jericho, to the northwest and southwest of the Jordan, then names Philadelphia to the southeast, and ends in Samaria, south of Galilee. One cannot rely on Pliny, who thought that coastal Samaria began not far north of Gaza and says that “beyond Idumaea and Samaria stretches the wide expanse of Judaea,” while “the part of Judaea adjoining Syria is called Samaria.”⁵ He has mixed up several directions, not just north and south. Conzelmann’s citation of Tacitus is not helpful, for the historian was not speaking precisely when he said that Felix governed Judaea, including Samaria, while Cumanus ruled over Galilee.⁶ As for the sequence in Acts, it could be due to the mission as described in Luke and, indeed, on the historical sequence as Luke envisaged it: churches first in Judaea and Galilee (Acts 2:7 [in Jerusalem]: “Are not all these Galileans?”), then in Samaria (Acts 8:1,14,25).

We suppose, therefore, that the framework in Luke is literary rather than cartographic. He first speaks of Jesus’ journey thus: “It happened

that when the days drew near for him to be received up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem” and began his journey near “a village of the Samaritans” (9:51-53). After that, he denounces Galilean towns such as Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum (10:13-15). Galileans are mentioned before dwellers in Jerusalem in sayings found in Luke 13:1-4. Luke 13:22 has Jesus go on “making his way to Jerusalem” because “it cannot be that a prophet should perish away from Jerusalem” (13:33). The sequence of subject matter thus seems to be Samaria-Galilee-Jerusalem. Again, after Luke 17:11 (Jerusalem-Samaria-Galilee) we immediately hear of cleansed lepers who include a Samaritan (17:16).

We may add that Luke obviously knows Paul and Barnabas could go from Antioch to Jerusalem through Phoenicia and Samaria (Acts 15:3). The route lay through Tyre or Ptolemais in Phoenicia (Acts 21:3). His geographical picture must be close to that of the reliable Josephus, who says that “the province of Samaria lies between Galilee and Judaea,” and that “it was the custom of the Galileans at the time of a festival to pass through the Samaritan territory on their way to the holy city.”⁷ Would Luke have contradicted Josephus?

2. *Asia*

Luke also provided details about Paul’s journeys and sometimes explained why he visited particular Roman regions. Thus in Acts 16:6-10 we hear of Paul’s passage through “Phrygia and the Galatian land, prevented by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in Asia.” These are obviously regions, not provinces, for “Phrygia” belonged partly to Asia and partly to Galatia, while “Galatia” means the northern part of the province; and “Asia” is primarily the region around Ephesus. “Mysia” too belonged to the province of Asia.⁸ After reaching Mysia Paul wanted to enter Bithynia, but the spirit of Jesus did not permit this. A night vision at Troas summoned him to Macedonia, and there he went. As Conzelmann points out, he could turn neither east nor west and therefore went west to the coast in order to head north. Later he went through the provinces of Macedonia and Achaëa (essentially Corinth, capital of Achaëa, 18:12),⁹ and spent some time in Asia on his way to Jerusalem and Rome (19:21-22). Other geographical names in Acts show either that Luke knew the area well or that he used a map with old kingdoms as well as Roman provinces.

Also in the late first century we find a list of addressees in northern

Asia Minor at the beginning of 1 Peter. Their names, based on provinces, are very roughly arranged in a circular sequence as Pontus (NE)-Galatia (central)-Cappadocia (E)-Asia (W)-Bithynia (NW). Perhaps the carrier was expected to follow this sequence, though it is not very direct. The Apocalypse of John also involves geography, since the author is on the Aegean island of Patmos and writes to Christians in seven mainland cities. These are Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea (1:9-11), related to Roman roads in the province of Asia. The letters would be carried first north from the capital Ephesus to Smyrna and Pergamum, then on the main highway south-east to Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea.

G. M. Bowersock has expressed suspicion about the address of the letter of the churches of Vienne and Lyons, which its author claimed was written to the brothers of Asia and Phrygia. He notes that “at that time Phrygia was an integral part of the province of Asia,” and goes on to cite evidence for the inclusion of Phrygia in Asia. An anti-Montanist author referred to Phrygians and then to “the faithful in (*kata*) Asia,”¹⁰ and the Apocalypse of John, addressed to “the seven churches of Asia,” includes Laodicea in Phrygia (Rev. 1:11). But the same anti-Montanist author refers to the outbreak of Montanism not in Phrygia but in “*Mysia* in (*kata*) Phrygia” and also dates the event “when Gratus was proconsul of Asia.”¹¹ Christians seem to have used kingdom and province names indiscriminately.

3. *Edges and Center*

The Roman 1 Clement refers to “the Ocean, which men cannot cross, and the worlds beyond it.”¹² Long before, Eratosthenes had stated that “if the size of the Atlantic Sea did not hinder, we could sail from Iberia to India along one and the same parallel.”¹³ But Clement is unlikely to have known Eratosthenes and did not anticipate Columbus. Let us move to the center of his map. He said that Paul preached in both the east and the west, and that he reached “the limit (*terma*) of the West.”¹⁴ Eratosthenes’ world map included a line drawn from west to east, beginning at the Pillars of Hercules, while Strabo says that the Pillars were at the end of the inhabited world.¹⁵ A Roman writer would think of Spain as in the west, especially since Paul mentioned it as his goal in his letter to the Romans—which Clement knew.¹⁶ A few decades later Irenaeus referred to the four cardinal points of the earth, with their four

principal winds, as *klimata* and described the existence of Christian churches in Germany (to the North), among the Iberias (the Spanish provinces) and the Celts (West), in the Orient (East), in Egypt and Libya (South), and “in the middle of the world.”¹⁷ Older Greeks had claimed Delphi for the center of the world, but the rhetorician Aelius Aristides was well aware that “everything meets here” at Rome.¹⁸ Irenaeus, who preached among the Celts, belonged to the West and presumably viewed Rome as in the middle. Christians and others came there from everywhere,¹⁹ as to the center of a circle.

For Clement Rome is at the center and at the edge is Arabia, where the phoenix lives. Every five hundred years such a bird makes a trip from Arabia “in the East” to Heliopolis in Egypt and then back.²⁰ Few people ever see one, and not everyone believes it exists. Another Roman Christian, Justin, discusses the subject more generally. If someone were to describe an Indian animal unlike all the others, no judgment about it could be made without eye-witness testimony. The topic was a current one. Just in this time the geographical historian Arrian referred to the strange animals said to be found in India and suggested they were “curiosities invented for amusement... not likely to be verified by anyone.”²¹ And India was not much more remote than Arabia or Heliopolis.

Just as the Palestinian *Psalms of Solomon* mean Rome by the term “West,”²² so when the Syrian Ignatius wrote to the Romans about being found in the West after coming from the East²³ he obviously meant Rome. He expresses an Antiochene version of Juvenal 3.62: *iam pridem Syrus in Tiberim defluxit Orontes*.²⁴ Justin’s sometime pupil, the Syrian Tatian, describes the work of geographers as futile just because the edges were so unreliable.²⁵ “Those who worked at geographies described regions (*choria*), as far as was humanly possible, but they had nothing to say about those beyond because they could not see them [like Justin’s peculiar Indian animal?]. They claimed there were tides as well as seas, some leek-green,²⁶ others muddy,²⁷ and areas, one torrid, another could and frozen.”²⁸ Tatian is picturing “the frame of the ancient Greek maps,” beginning with east and west and then touching on south and north.²⁹ The same geographical point is clear in Plutarch (as scholars long ago observed), who began his *Life of Theseus* with comments on ancient maps. “Geographers,” he wrote, “crowd on to the outer edges of their maps the parts of the earth which escape their knowledge, with explanatory notes that ‘What lies beyond is waterless

sand, full of wild beasts,' or 'dark mud'³⁰ or 'Scythian frost' or 'frozen sea.' ". These notes point toward southwest, southeast, northeast, and northwest. Tatian's frosty area, like the frozen sea, obviously lies to the north, while this torrid zone, like Plutarch's sandy desert, and even the dark mud, is to the south. Since the leek-green sea is to the southeast, the muddy sea must lie to the southwest.

4. *Paradise and Colonization*

Exegetes often dealt with two aspects of the creation story—its timeless, possibly symbolic character, and its factual geography related to "east," four rivers, and the subsequent expansion of the human race. Josephus' *Antiquities*, sometimes used by Christian authors, identifies the rivers flowing from Eden as Ganges, Tigris, Euphrates, and Nile,³¹ and describes the ways the grandchildren of Noah colonized the world.³²

The Christian apologist Theophilus knew that the garden of Eden was "of earth and planted on the earth," and that rivers called Phison and Geon watered the eastern parts (*meré*) of the world. He did not identify Phison, which Josephus had said was the Ganges, but stated that "they say" that Geon, encircling Ethiopia, appears in Egypt, "where it is called the Nile." The Tigris and the Euphrates "are well known to us because they border on our own regions (*klimata*)."³³ His discussion of colonization looks like a garbled version of Josephus.

Gnostic exegetes usually rejected such literal crassness, preferring their own diagrams of the heavens, and apocalyptic exegetes placed paradise in the east, north, and west. Sometimes it was set in heaven or even in "the third heaven," where it appears in Slavonic Enoch and 2 Corinthians 12:2-4. Paul tells of a "man in Christ" carried off to "the third heaven" or "paradise," where he heard "ineffable words."

Oddly enough, Origen combines allegory with letter in his treatise *On First Principles*: "I think that on leaving this life the saints will remain in some place on earth, called Paradise by divine scripture, as in a place of instruction." Those who have pure hearts and good minds will then advance into the air and reach the kingdoms of heaven, crossing the so-called "abodes" called "spheres." When they are higher still, they will contemplate the nature of the stars.³⁴

This picture contradicts what Origen usually says about Paradise. Perhaps he was impressed by Theophilus' description: "God chose for man a place in the eastern regions, excellent for its light, brilliant with

brighter air, with most beautiful plants.”³⁵ More probably he just looked at Genesis 2:8, with its “garden in Eden, to the east” with trees “pleasant to the sight.” Theophilus took the text literally; but perhaps a paradise in Mesopotamia would not be much more remote than one in the third heaven.

NOTES

¹ Herodotus 2.116-17.

² H. Conzelmann, *The Theology of St. Luke* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), 18-94, especially 68-73; *Das Mitte der Zeit* (3rd ed., Tübingen: Mohr, 1960), especially 60-66.

³ Compare Conzelmann, *Die Apostelgeschichte* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1963), 60.

⁴ Strabo *Geography* 16.2.34, c. 760.

⁵ Pliny *Natural History* 5.66-70.

⁶ Tacitus *Annals* 12.54.

⁷ Josephus *Jewish War* 3.48 (“on the south [Galilee] is bounded by Samaria,” 3.37); *Antiquities* 20.118.

⁸ Conzelmann, *Apostelgeschichte*, 89.

⁹ Acts 18:12 (proconsul at Corinth), 18:27 (Corinth).

¹⁰ Eusebius *Church History* 5.16.10.

¹¹ Ibid. 5.16.7.

¹² 1 Clement 20.8.

¹³ Strabo *Geography* 1.4.6, c. 64; R. Knopf, *Die Apostolischen Väter* 1 (Tübingen: Mohr, 1920), 80.

¹⁴ 1 Clement 5.6-7.

¹⁵ Strabo *Geography* 2.1.1, c.67; 3.5.5, c. 169-70.

¹⁶ Paul, Romans 15:24,28; 1 Clement 35.5-6 (Romans 1:29-32).

¹⁷ Irenaeus *Against Heresies* 3.11.8; 1.10.2.

¹⁸ E.g. Strabo 9.3.6, cc. 419-20; Aelius Aristides *Oration* 26,13, p. 95.17 Keil; on his sources cf. J. R. Oliver, *The Ruling Power* (Transactions of the American Philosophical Society N.S. 43,4, 1953), 879-80, 911.

¹⁹ Irenaeus *Against Heresies* 1 praef. 3; 3.3.2. Tacitus (*Annals* 15.44) provides a less favorable picture of Rome, “to which all things disgusting and shameful flow together from every side and become famous.”

²⁰ 1 Clement 25.

²¹ Justin *Dialogue with Trypho* 3.6; Arrian *Anabasis of Alexander* 5.4.3.

²² *Psalms of Solomon* 17:4.

²³ Ignatius *Romans* 2.2.

²⁴ Cf. Callimachus *Hymns* 2.108-9 for “the Assyrian river.”

²⁵ Tatian *Oration* 20.2, p. 22,24 Schwartz-Whittaker. Cf. *VC* 3 (1949), 225-27

²⁶ Liddell-Scott-Jones 1461 note that geographers (or one geographer?) use (uses?) the word (*prasodes*) of part of the Indian Ocean: *Hypotyposis Geographiae* 32 (C. Müller, *Geographi Graeci Minores*, 2.502; Marcian *Periplus Maris Exteri* 1.40,44 (ibid. 1.536, 537).

²⁷ Strato, cited in Strabo *Geography* 1.3.4-5 (c. 50-51), emphasizes the muddiness of the Black Sea and the Mediterranean, but the mud could also be Libyan.

²⁸ "Frozen" (Scythia) contrasted with "torrid" (Ethiopia), Galen *On Sects* 3, p. 6,20 Helmreich = 1.71 Kühn.

²⁹ W. A. Heidel, *The Frame of the Ancient Greek Maps* (American Geographical Society, Research Series No. 20, New York, 1937).

³⁰ Hesychius 3.331 relates this to "Libya" and the surrounding Ocean.

³¹ Josephus *Antiquities* 1.38-39.

³² Ibid. 1.122-47.

³³ Genesis 2:10-14; Theophilus *To Autolycus* 2.24. For the meaning of *klimata* see Strabo 2.5.34, c. 131.

³⁴ Origen *On First Principles* 2.11.6-7.

³⁵ Theophilus *To Autolycus* 2.19.

The Divinity School, University of Chicago
Chicago, IL 60637